

Book 19 - Gaze

The cloak of blood I wrapped around myself began to settle. My wandering is over, the way forward is clear, and all that remains is to tread it. I shall spill blood and, at times, drink it, but I will never stop this movement.

However, before I can do so, I must cut down the Distorted mass before me, the first of the blood that I truly must spill. And, at the same time, lop off the neck of my cowardice, which I've been turning a blind eye to for all this time.

'...You know, Ver. I'll tell you one more thing before we part. I might know a way to get you closer to achieving your dream.'

I recalled the voice again.

If one were to think rationally, there is no basis for believing everything the voice said. However, I feel confident that being would not lie. It's something different from reason or logic.

This was... what my soul felt.

It's strange, assuming there even is such a thing as a soul.

If the flow my soul points to is right, if the method the voice spoke of exists...

Then I can say that the time I've long waited for has finally arrived.

If fate truly does exist, and if everything is predetermined to follow it, then surely this moment has been waiting for me. And I, too, must have been waiting for this moment to come. When my thoughts reached this point, I felt a slightly nauseating bliss.

The idea that there may be something in this world that can grant my wishes like magic. That previously nonexistent notion enveloped my heart.

Fate has never been pleasant to me.

Thus, I never believed in it.

However, I killed many things while suppressing my heart.

It appears that I felt relief from the story that everything I had done that stained my hands with blood was due to my fate.

It's as if my wish, brought true by fate, guided me here.

All the misfortunes I've faced up until now formed the foundation of this very moment.

"This can't be... I never recorded this event within my dots..."

The Distorted Jumsoon mumbled his apparent disbelief under his breath.

"Yes, you might have drawn a great many worlds, but it was only enough to fill a canvas, and no matter what, humans cannot contain infinity in canvas. As such, there had to be a limit to your dots."

"No, you died by my hand for the umpteenth time. After killing and killing you again, I was sure I'd wake up, and yet...!"

"It was just a repeat. Besides, there's no such thing as absolute. That's why... I can advance into the future."

I hoped that absoluteness did not exist.
But that is why hope can be cruel as well. Because as long as something is possible,
expectations will arise.
Because we don't know, because they might not be empty.

"....."

Suddenly, a doubt arose.
The voice was curious about what kind of world I wanted to create. If Distorting is by nature
a phenomenon brought about by that voice, it must have talked with Jumsoon and asked
that same question.
It would have whispered sweet words filled with sincerity and gentleness, telling him only to
look at himself, and that it would lend him strength.

"What is it that you hope to achieve?"

"Naturally... I want to fill the world with dots."

"I see."

"And you? What world are you trying to reach?"

Jumsoon's pupils, covered with dots, glimmered. His countless pupils expanded to the fullest
as if wanting to see the world I desired.

"It's hard to put into words."

The world I want...

"It's a world that can only be understood once you feel it with your whole body."

Jumsoon's mouth widened into a huge line. What a grotesque smile.
Simultaneously, he began to rush me down with his dark-blue fists.
I didn't avoid the punches Jumsoon threw, but instead received them with my whole body.
Every time I touch a spot tinged with a dot, I'm forced to face and sink into despair.
After being dragged down deep into this quagmire, I once again see all the possible despair I
could have encountered. However, now that I have forged my resolve, all the despair that
unfolded before me began to reflect a tenacious hope.

As such, I can cut them down without hesitation.

All that obstructs me whenever I'm thrown into this world of dots.

Within are Lapis, Garnet, Rikako, Lan Yen, Denver, Sim Nanseul, the children of the
orphanage, and many other faces I miss but cannot meet anymore.

Once everything I cut down shed its blood, the dot that had become nothing more than my quagmire was dyed red, akin to a puddle of blood. I rose, holding that redness.



"How! How can you stand upright amidst these dots...!?"

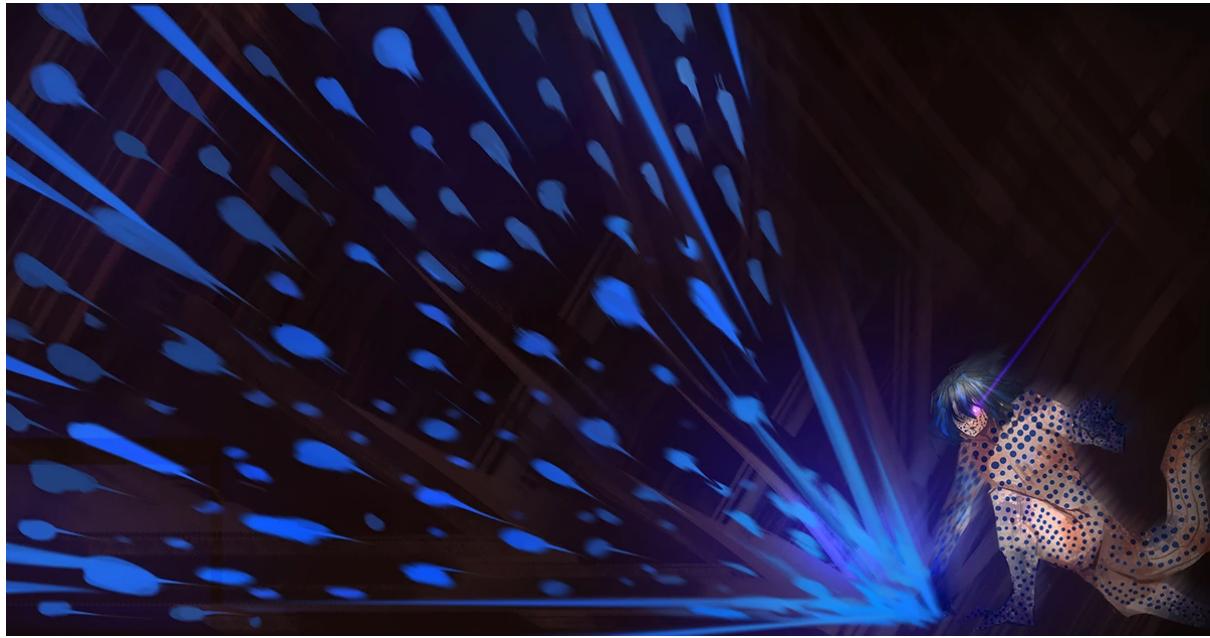
Jumsoon goggles his numerous pupils, seemingly unable to comprehend the situation.

Although the painting, abundantly stamped with dots, may look full from a distance, blank spaces are just as abundant when looking closely.

Similarly, the mind cannot be wholly filled with dots.

"Your dots may brush against me, but they cannot stain me."

As soon as I finished speaking, Jumsoon gathered all his strength and struck the ground. Dots permeated the floor in a uniform pattern as if a burst of indigo paint, before rushing towards me at furious speeds. However, the fast-moving dots never connected. As such, they couldn't even form lines.

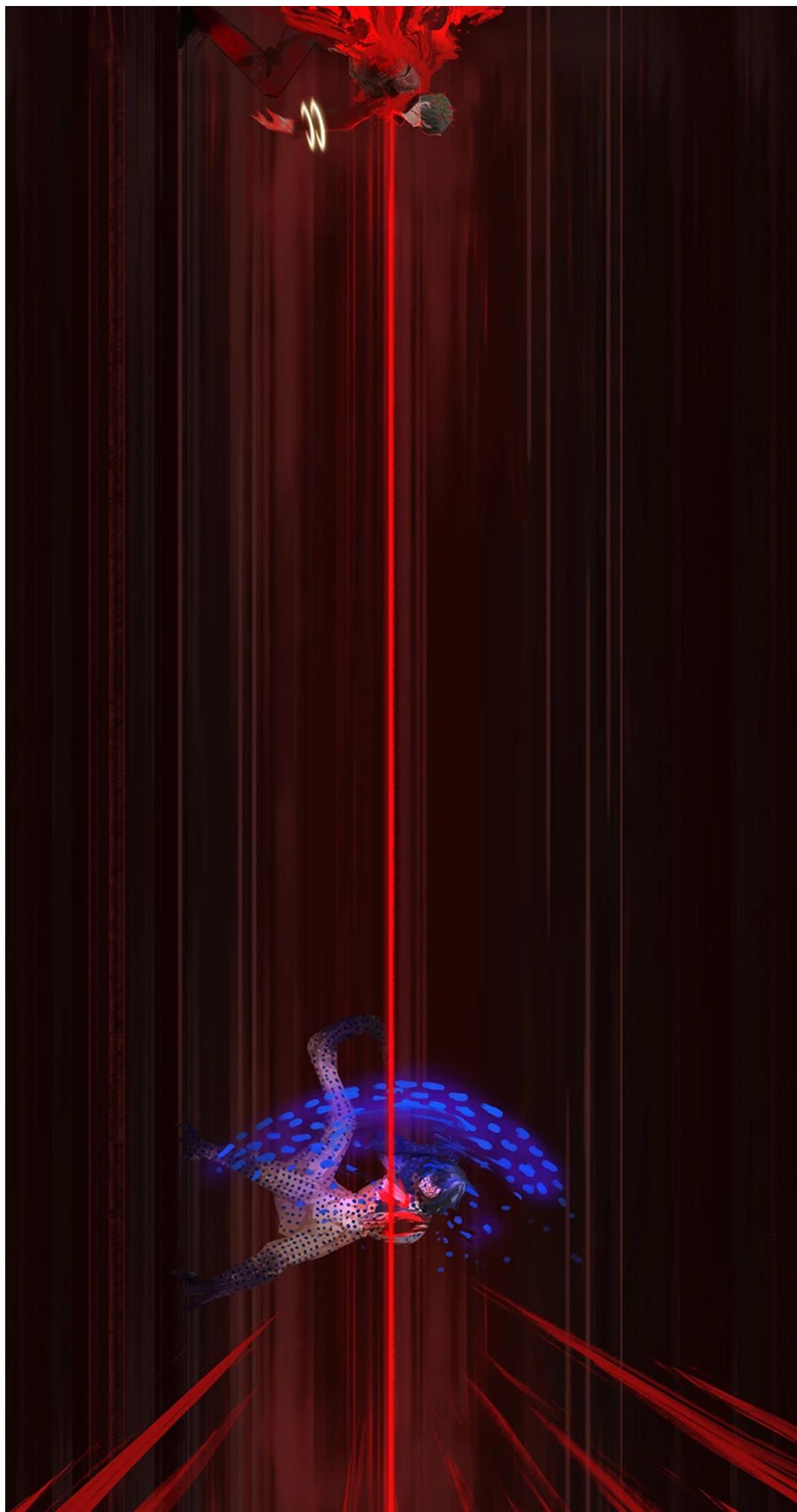


This might have been because surfaces don't exist in the world he is trying to create. The blank space in between the dots is an infinity left empty, a scope left unchosen. I begin to link the excluded gaps with the blood I continuously shed.

Each dot meets to form a line, and the line flows to create a surface, and once that space is filled, I'll be able to envision my desire. As if by instinct, I coil the blood surface around itself like a flag to create a long, flowing line akin to a spear. A red spear made by neatly weaving dots one after another.

I throw this line to Jumsoon's chest with boundless indifference.

In order to catch the spear, Jumsoon swung his fist, unfolding a curtain made of countless dots. But there were too many leaking holes in that incomplete chain. The red line I created, both a surface and a red dot when seen from the front, penetrated through the curtain made of several blue dots, thus piercing Jumsoon's right arm and shoulder.



"It reached completion with only a single dot."

"...*cough*"

"The moment the dots become aligned, the beauty that enchanted you faded away, did it not?"

Humans have no choice but to walk along lines and live atop surfaces. For the ones who advance, a dot is merely fleeting.

Dots are just moments. Perhaps as time passed and the many moments of despair that came my way accumulated one by one, the instants that were mere dots formed a line, opening a path of possibility.

Jumsoon, in his obsession with the moment, was fascinated by the stimulation an instant could cause. He couldn't break free from the moments that gave him the ecstasy of soaring without limits or the hopelessness of free-falling without knowing when he'll hit the floor.

Now that he knows the contradiction of the dot,

He'll be dragged down toward the endless abyss.

Like the branches of a tree that had its roots dug up.

According to the voice, Distorting is a form of rebirth under a new appearance by fully embracing their craving. The value they consider to be the answer becomes their *raison d'être*, and their form changes to the shape they wished for.

If the very desire that encompasses their foundation collapsed, what would happen to the things that composed it?

If it cannot exist, it would only be right for them to melt down.

"....."

Jumsoon stayed silent, and all his movements came to a standstill.

Is he entering the egg once again?

However, the world isn't so kind and convenient as to give someone so many chances.

Like with people or the City, it may seem friendly on the outside, but it is unspeakably cold inside.

Jumsoon kept staring at me. No expression was discernible from the face where the gaze originated.

Then, a blue liquid began to burst out from Jumsoon's stomach.

A machine arm wielding a saw blade divided Jumsoon's chest in half. Something stirred from within him. It wasn't a cocoon, an egg, or anything similar, but a completely alien form that had no point of contact with the series of dots that was the life of Jumsoon.

"....."

The thing, which had begun to vigorously cleave and stretch Jumsoon's flesh, made itself born by dragging its huge size, too great to fit inside his body, outward. It appeared to be an iron strongbox with saw blades attached to it, but it also looked like a bizarre sculpture with several arms resembling bug legs emerging from it.



And at the center of it all, a gaze emanating from a single eye.

Our eyes meet.

Yet I'm not looking at it.

It's peeking at me.

The pupil in that closed-off space is stealthily and, at the same time, persistently peeping at me.

Immediately, a pair of saw blades furiously spun and tried to cut me down with enough force to grind even the air.

By reflex, I managed to block the saw blade with my sword.

"Tch..."

Perhaps it isn't correct to say I managed to block it.

It was unmanageable. So heavy that it's hard to accurately represent in words.

The saw blade spun and came face-to-face with mine, and blood began to splatter in all directions from the blood-twined red sword. If this situation persists, the sword itself will be cleaved apart.

That by itself isn't an issue. I can always make a new sword from blood. But that would necessitate new blood to be shed to maintain the blade. I'd like to avoid that.

As such.

I wrap my body in my red cloak, becoming one giant drop of blood. The saw grinds even this, causing countless blood spurts to clammily drench the floor like a fountain. The fallen blood soon pools together, forming a puddle, and I become one with the blood, hiding my body within.

Until all the blood on the floor dries up, I'll be able to reappear any time I want. No, to be more accurate, I had a feeling I could do so.

This earned me just a little breathing room. Before the blood coagulates, I have to finish assessing the situation.

The eye was still looking at me. It was something different from glaring. There was a viscous greed to it.

It was... craving and coveting after me with its eye.

'Kreeeek!'

While I was in the puddle, it changed its target and began tearing the things crawling in the lab to pieces. Even if they were only incapacitated, my efforts to save them had already been torn to shreds.

Eventually, after slaughtering everything that moved before its eye, it turned its gaze straight to the next target, the three people standing behind one of the laboratory's shattered windows.

Gubo, the researcher named Aseah, and Nanseul.

As if satisfied with his observation, Gubo nodded to Aseah, who then opened the lab's back door. The Corridor was visible through the slightly ajar door.

Could Aseah already maneuver through the Corridor? If so, he could have escaped from here at any given moment...

He must have had many reasons not to fly away, even though he knew how to open his cage.

Leaving behind Nanseul, who was shouting in confusion, the two entered the Corridor and promptly closed the door.

And now, Nanseul is alone. The many-legged box dashed towards him, spinning its saw blade.

Nanseul will now understand the meaning of this situation.

The only tool he has at his disposal is a somewhat thin knife made for extracting moonstones. A traitor's blade, adequate for gouging those without murderous intent, but not fit for standing up to those who have. Nanseul knows he will die without being able to put up a proper resistance.

...And he vaguely knows that I will try to save him from this situation.

The saw blade-wielding box, together with a cacophonous metallic sound, closes in on Nanseul until only one step remains.

And that is when I emerge from the blood puddle, exposing my form.

"...!"

I swing my bloody sword, spraying blood droplets onto the box. Once dispersed, the embedded drops soon condense into sharp blades to cut it apart.

However, although the blood embedded itself in the box, it remained uncut. As if denying the violence born of blood, the blood daggers stick to the iron box without being able to pierce it. But that was enough to direct the box's attention to me. Its body turns around, and once again our gazes meet.

I asked Nanseul, who was behind it.

"...What were your reasons for doing this?"

His reasons don't matter at this point, but I just want to hear them from Nanseul's mouth. I wondered what he had to gain from turning his back on me and the Office.

"Boss..."

"Why did you do it?"

Resignation was visible in Nanseul's face. We both know that we only have a few moments before we attract the box's gaze and that the situation can reverse at any time.

"You... can survive anything, you know. But I can't. Unlike the Ring, you wouldn't seek revenge that doesn't benefit your plan in the pursuit of a Singularity."

"....."

"However, I... don't have the self-confidence to let myself be hunted down by the Ring for the rest of my life. Was I the only one? I'm sure the others felt the same."

"So you thought that I would let you live?"

"...No, I didn't."

Saying so, Nanseul showed a weak smile, appearing to be a little exhausted.

"But my family will. You'd kill me, a traitor, but would never touch my family."

"....."

"The Ring wouldn't mind doing something like that. Haha, still, at least it wasn't the Middle."

I closed my eyes.

Nanseul's words carried a heavy weight.

I had wandered aimlessly along the road, relying on the orphanage. However, I couldn't protect even that, nor could I properly avenge the children, so I can only wonder how uncertain and risky I must have seemed through my subordinates' eyes. Not only that, but to what extent was I able to protect someone I didn't know?

In the end, I, who couldn't do anything right, was the one that pushed Nanseul into that choice.

I failed to consider Nanseul's position, and Nanseul also didn't try to comprehend mine. In this world, moments of disconnect like these will inevitably occur.

We thought we knew each other, but despite our overconfidence in our five senses, we couldn't truly understand each other.

"If I were to die, then I hoped to bring you down with me. But, after all... My wish for death was a desire beyond my reach, too."

I shut my eyes, and during the fleeting moment it took to recollect the thoughts and emotions raging inside my mind, the box already had spun around and minced Nanseul's body.

"....."

That immediate slaughter occurred before I was able to do anything. That thing couldn't think, only hunger.

I once again hid myself in the puddle of blood.

Inside the dots, I abandoned such sentiments as sorrow and grief that I could candidly express to Nanseul. No matter whose death unfolds before me, I have resolved to walk down this path.

I didn't obtain enough information from the short clash I had with it. However, I instinctively knew that thing was a new existence, wholly estranged from the sequence of dots that was the life of the human being called Jumsoon.

Something like a Distortion, yet different.

Or, maybe...

It's a very weak guess, but I have no time to leisurely solve that thing's origin. The air here is cold and dry, making spilled blood harden quickly. If all the blood dries up, I won't be able to reveal my body and will be trapped on the floor as I am now.

The gaze persistently followed me as I shifted my position within the blood.

Its pupil steadily chased me as if it knew for certain where I was inside the puddle. I don't have much blood left now in this familiar yet new weapon and armor. I felt like I'll be unable to use this ability anymore if I run out of blood, and if that were to happen, I'd die vomiting out all of my blood. These tools can only be used again if I fill them with someone else's blood.

Thus, I have to finalize my judgment before the blood dries up.

As that thing emerged from a Distortion, it cannot have a completely different nature from them, therefore, its existence as a being consumed by and that behaves according to its desire has, in the end, remained unchanged. That, from the beginning, may have been yet another facet of the Distortions. However, I still have no solid information about any of this, only vague guesses.

I have no other choice than to amass what little information I have and grope my way forward.

It should have been a strenuous task to locate my position within the blood in a general sense.

But even inside the puddle, that thing maintains eye contact with me.

Also...

During the brief moment I closed my eyes, the box moved from behind me to kill Nanseul.

...As such,

What that eye longs for...

...is another's gaze.



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